

## DUTCH HUMANISM

Humanism is indigenous to the Netherlands. At the end of the Middle Ages a peculiar monastic order developed within the frame of the Roman-Catholic church: the brethren of common life. They turned to worldly life, because "there are many who do not enjoy the protection of the name 'faith' and who can nevertheless be called more faithful than those who are called religious by the church." They wanted to be the leaven in the world. They produced books, established libraries, and organized education. Characteristic was their real concern for the poor. Erasmus was one of their heirs. But as to their social interest their tradition was continued by a person like Ludovico Vives, living in Bruges. He vindicated the support of the poor as a civil right and this idea was realized in the 16th century in the regulations of the city of Leyden.

To this same undogmatic tradition belongs the idea and the practice of tolerance. The principle of religious freedom was laid down in the fundamental charter that led to the republic of the United Netherlands and though it was often endangered it was nevertheless maintained. De Groot founded international relations on natural law; Spinoza wrote his secular ethics in a mathematical way. One of the forerunners of the French encyclopedists found a refuge in the republic and published his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. Dutch enlightenment stood in the front line of the struggle against trials for witchcraft. As a matter of fact witches in Holland were not tried but weighed and found too heavy to ride on a broom stick!

Modern 19th century religion developed in a critical, natural direction. Some of the outstanding modern ministers became free-thinkers; free-religious societies were founded. One of the most famous Dutch authors (Multatuli) was an aggressive Free-thinker. Free-thought expanded in a monistic sphere. Heymans, 20th century philosopher and psychologist, remodelled Kantianism into a psycho-monism and asked for a "church of the ideal". Within the labour movement originated a religious socialism of Fabian nature. Besides a most liberal Protestantism interpreted the Bible in a mere critical and almost natural way. Frontiers between biblical and autonomous humanism faded. The historian Huizinga was an outstanding representative of this borderland. Various essayists bade "farewell to reverend's land".

In this situation the modern humanist movement emerged in 1945, from theology and philosophy rather than from science. The national pattern determined its outlook. It shows a reflective nature, combined with a definite tendency towards practical activities in the cultural and social field. Dutch humanism is not an elaborate philosophical theory but a human point of departure that allows of several philosophies and several social interpretations. It is defined as a conviction that aims at understanding life and the world by an appeal to human capacities. It considers essential for man a sense of value that cannot be changed arbitrarily and it requires continuous readiness for reasoned justification of thought and action. It respects man in his human value and it acknowledges him in his natural, social and universal contexts. It claims freedom and justice and demands realization in the practice of life.

This humanism, although explicitly non-creedal, is in its realism definitely non-sectarian. The movement wants to be all-inclusive and unites indeed people of the most different philosophical, political and social outlooks; idealists, positivists and existentialists; rationalist and religious humanists; socialists and liberals; outstanding politicians and artists: captains of industry and trade-union leaders; intellectuals and common men and women. The movement wants to be a centre of inspiration for all of them in their different aims and activities, and indeed one will discover them in all kinds of professions, institutions and movements where they cooperate with like-minded people of other convictions. Moreover the movement has its official representatives on various councils, committees and bodies for national cooperation.

Apart from that the movement exercises its proper function as a congregation of like-minded people. It is a source of reflection for its members. It stimulates their thinking in the fields of philosophy, social policy, world security, discrimination, cultural and personal life, without taking a dogmatic stand itself. It deals with personal ethics, especially with marriage and sexual behaviour, with education and questions of sorrow and happiness, of solidarity and guilt, of deficiency and reconciliation. But it also develops great activity in the area of individual counselling (pastoral care) which aims at awakening the capacities of independently handling a conviction of life. Moreover the movement is concerned in social work (Association Humanitas): child-care, rehabilitation, family-welfare, care for aged people, etc.

In this way the humanist movement did not fail to make an impact on Dutch life. It plays its proper part in society because it embodies an important tradition in Dutch history in a modern way, and because in its outlook and attitudes it represents a characteristic trait of the Dutch pattern. Nevertheless it shares with the international humanist movement their aims and commitments by which it is continually influenced, as it influences — may be — every now and then this international movement by its tolerance and practical concern.

J. P. van Praag

#### THE BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

A correction is due of the premature announcement of a change of name of the British Ethical Union to British Humanist Association. This change was overtaken by negotiations with the Rationalist Press Association which resulted in a decision jointly to form a common front with the name "The British Humanist Association".

Mention of the BHA on the back cover of this journal should therefore be understood as representing both the Ethical Union and the Rationalist Press Association.

The BHA will be formally inaugurated at a dinner in the House of Commons on May 17. Sir Julian Huxley will preside, and the speakers will be Lady Wootton and Professor A. J. Ayer.